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ABSTRACT

Analyzing the setting of six recent "blockbuster" films, this study outlines numerous instances of the Western's influence on several contemporary science fiction films, "Star Wars," "Battlestar Galactica," "Star Trek: The Motion Picture," "The Black Hole," "The Empire Strikes Back," and "Battle beyond the Stars." The correspondence of this phenomenon to cultural models of reality is also explored. Teenagers, according to 1979 survey findings, account for almost 50 percent of total yearly box office admissions. This age group may be primarily responsible for the record-breaking success of science fiction films and the virtual disappearance of the conventional Western in the last four years. Perhaps this is because the young movie audience did not find the Western culturally "vraisemblable," i.e., meaningful in terms of cultural reality. The study concludes that the classic Western visual motifs like the saloon, the devastated homestead, the campfire, the horse, and the wilderness persist in the artificial setting of the science fiction film. (Thirty notes are included.) (RS)

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"*Vraisemblance* and the Western Setting in Contemporary Science Fiction Film"

by Lane Roth

Vraisemblance is the correspondence of a text to some cultural model which is already accepted as natural and understood. According to Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*, this is the foundation for "the important structuralist concept of *intertextualite*: the relation of a particular text to other texts."[1] It is through such relationships that any individual text acquires meaning, for the definition of a text in relation to cultural models makes it intelligible and coherent.

The genre film, encoded by film communicators and decoded by their audiences as a concrete manifestation of an abstract, taxonomic system, exemplifies *par excellence* Culler's dioscuric concepts of *vraisemblance* and intertextuality. Genre films evolved as formulaic, film-factory products created to provide tacit, commercial guarantees for audiences as well as filmmakers. Thomas Schatz has commented on the "high degree of audience familiarity with these cinematic forms and hence the active but indirect audience participation in the creation of genre films..."[2] The shared cultural meanings implicit in film genre make the concept of genre, as Andrew Tudor insists, "indispensable...as a way of formulating the interplay between culture, audience, films, and filmmakers."[3]

Culler's literary concept of *vraisemblance* has been applied to film genre study by Paul Petlewski. His study, essentially a reading of an individual film, points out the special problems of analyzing a work which is a "cross-breeding of successful genres."[4] In such an instance, the given text must correspond to two or more distinct

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genre models so that the separate models, as well as their confluence, are understood. The synthesis must also "make sense" by corresponding to a more general, cultural model of reality.

Science fiction is a film genre that has often been combined with another. Traditionally, the rapport between science fiction and horror has been so developed that two major studies about film genre, which devote separate chapters to the Western, the musical, and the gangster film, treat science fiction and horror as one unit.[5] By contrast, the fusion of science fiction and the Western film has been so rare that past examples like *The Phantom Empire* (1936), *Moon Zero Two* (1969), and *Westworld* (1973) may be regarded as anomalies.

The phenomenal success of *Star Wars* (1977) has created new possibilities for contemporary cinema. The genre film is experiencing a robust, and unexpected, revival.[6] In particular, science fiction film production has increased, with elevated budgets. Audience acceptance can be measured by unprecedented box office earnings: the weekly trade magazine *Variety* reports that two of the three top-grossing films ever, are science fiction.[7] The spectacular rise of the science fiction film since 1977 can be contrasted with the contemporaneous eclipse of the Western. This phenomenon has been noted by Hollywood filmmakers. Robert Wise, director of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), has predicted that "we may see the Western film supplanted entirely by science fiction."[8] While the future of individual genres must remain speculative, the incorporation of conventions of the Western into today's science fiction films can be demonstrated. The cross pollination has recurred within the compressed time of four years, and without correlation to directors, producers, writers, distributors, or others usually attributed with film creation.

In his theoretical inquiry into the nature of film genre, Edward Buscombe has insisted that "the major defining characteristics of genres will be visual."[9] This is in accord with John Baxter's assessment that science fiction cinema is "basically a sensuous medium,"[10] and John Cawelti's indication that "the Western formula is initially defined by its setting."[11] This study will describe instances of the Western's influence on contemporary science fiction films by analysis of setting in six recent "blockbusters": *Star Wars* (1977), *Battlestar Galactica* (1978), *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), *The Black Hole* (1979), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), and *Battle Beyond the Stars* (1980). The correspondence of this phenomenon to cultural models of reality will then be explored.

Setting

The influence of the Western on the physical environment of recent science fiction films is seen in images of the saloon, the ravaged homestead, the campfire, the horse, and the wilderness. While such images are not literal reproductions from cowboy movies, they are recognizable counterparts.

The saloon, according to Peter Homans, "is by far the most important building in the western."[12] Jon Tuska suggests that it was the early silent Westerns of William S. Hart that "invariably located the source of sin in the saloon and dance hall."[13] This correlation of physical and moral coordinates has persisted in the Western so that by convention, the saloon is the locus of evil. Homans defines that evil as "the failure to resist temptation," the forms of which include "drinking, gambling, money..."[14] Variations of the saloon appear in *Star Wars* and *Battlestar Galactica*. In *Star Wars*, Obi-Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness) cautions young Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) about the Mos Eisley spaceport cantina: "You will never find a more wretched hive of scum

and villainy." Luke is soon seen in the cantina at the bar. Numerous humans in *Battlestar Galactica*, including hero Lt. Starbuck (Dirk Benedict), are shown drinking in the casino on the planet Carillon, where Starbuck exults in his winnings at the ubiquitous tables of chance. True to the Puritan ethic, such temptations as drinking, gambling, and money risk violent retribution. Luke is provoked and nearly killed by murderous, alien felons. The Carillon casino is revealed to be a treacherous blandishment staged by predatory insectoids allied with the humans' archenemies.

The homestead of Luke's uncle and aunt in Star Wars re-creates images of the Western Frontier. In particular, Luke's uncle owns a "moisture farm" so that he is dedicated to transforming the desert wilderness, which evidently characterizes the entire planet of Tatooine, into a garden. According to Henry Nash Smith, it was the "master symbol of the garden," with its mythic reverberations of Eden, that promoted the settling of the American West and shaped American political, economic, and social values.[15] The devastation of this homestead can be generalized to read as an assault on America's premier myth. Robert G. Collins has observed that "the massacre of everyone at Luke's homestead in his absence, which frees him to go forth, and with the added motive of revenge, is a scene of fire and slaughter that resembles every Indian massacre of the past three hundred years in fact and fiction."[16] The specific intertextuality of this scene from *Star Wars* and a similar discovery of a family massacred and homestead ravaged in John Ford's Western *The Searchers* (1956) has been acknowledged by Roger Copeland and Andrew Gordon.[17]

Another familiar Western setting is the campfire, which provides light and warmth to protect an isolated social group, representing civilization, from untamed nature. The fire further sustains the community by transforming food from "the raw,"

corresponding to nature, to "the cooked," corresponding to culture.[18] The dialectic between nature and culture, the wilderness and civilization, has been identified by Jim Kitses as a major theme of the Western film.[19] *The Empire Strikes Back* adapts the Western campfire setting to the science fiction visual surface. Having crash-landed on the bog planet Dolgobah, Luke Skywalker and his robotic companion R2-D2 huddle at dusk around a glowing device resembling a camper's Coleman lantern. Safe from the swamp monsters, Luke eats and talks to R2. An amusing encounter follows with Yoda, the alien Jedi Master, who is attracted to the "campfire" setting. The classic campfire is given further humorous treatment, combining Western and science fiction images, in *Battle Beyond the Stars*. A community of aliens camped outdoors at night on the surface of the planet Akir, roast "hotdogs from Earth" without a fire. The heat energy is radiated from the living bodies of two thermal creatures called "Kelvins," as a character called Cowboy (George Peppard) plays "Red River Valley" on the harmonica.

Counterparts to the cowboy's horse are the taun-tauns in *The Empire Strikes Back*. Framed in long shots, the taun-taun is clearly an exotic, bipedal creature resembling a huge kangaroo with horns. When framed in a medium shot with hero Han Solo (Harrison Ford) or Luke Skywalker astride, the animal looks more like a familiar steed. Like the horse, the taun-taun is used as trusty animal transportation. After it dies, its carcass is used to shelter the hero from hostile elements, in *Empire* a blizzard instead of the conventional sandstorm.

The primary analog to the cowboy's horse is the spaceship. References to the horse are found in the names *Palomino* for the exploratory ship in *The Black Hole*, and *Nell* for the hero's scout ship in *Battle Beyond the Stars*. Dialog reinforces that allusion, as when the *Palomino* is buffeted by the gravitational forces of the black hole,

first mate Charlie Pizer (Joseph Bottoms) describes the ship as "bucking like a bronco." Unlike the horse, the spaceship is an artifact and may accommodate many people as well as an individual. Significantly like the horse, however, the spaceship provides the science fiction film hero with physical mobility.

The analogy works because outer space is the modern equivalent of the Western frontier. While the historical past of the American West may seem antithetical to the fanciful future of science fiction, the past of the movie Western, as John G. Cawelti observes, is a "timeless epic past."[20] Similarly, *Star Wars* begins with a written preface ending in ellipses: "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away..."

According to Cawelti, "two major characteristics of the western setting turned out to have an enormous potential for cinematic expression: its great openness of space and its powerful visual contrasts."[21] These qualities also apply to outer space in the science fiction film, where an (understood) unbounded area of darkness contrasts dramatically with white spaceships, brightly colored planets, and pinpoints of stellar light. Cawelti attributes the Western's topography with being "particularly expressive for the portrayal of movement," and recalls the effectiveness of the scene

> in which a rider appears like an infinitely small dot at the far end of a great empty horizon and then rides toward us across the intervening space, just as there is a different thrill about the vision of a group of horses and men plunging pell-mell from the foreground into the empty distance.[22]

Conspicuous examples of this same screen direction abound in recent science fiction films. *Star Wars*' extended opening shot, following the introductory roll-up titles, shows heroine Princess Leia's (Carrie Fisher's) starship entering the shot from the foreground, frame right, and then receding into the background, toward frame left. The identical right to left, foreground to background movement is reiterated

immediately and impressively in the same shot by an enormous Imperial Star Destroyer, commanded by Darth Vader (David Prowse), which is in pursuit. Exactly the reverse screen direction is seen in the opening shot of the *Black Hole*, where the *Palomino* emerges from the frame left background and moves obliquely toward the camera, to exit the frame right foreground. *The Empire Strikes Back* begins, following the roll-up prolog titles, with very slow movement of an Imperial Star Destroyer towards the camera in frame center. The film ends with a contrasting shot of the Rebel Base Ship moving slowly away from the camera in the center of the frame. Both screen directions are combined in the second shot of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. A formation of three Klingon warships is seen moving from the center frame background toward the foreground. Maintaining shot continuity through an intricate maneuver, the camera booms up and then down behind the three ships, which are now shown from the reverse camera angle, continuing away from the foreground toward the background. The battle sequences in *Battlestar Galactica*, *Battle Beyond the Stars*, and *Star Wars*, and the exciting chase through the asteroid belt in *The Empire Strikes Back* primarily contain shots of spaceships alternately fleeing from or pursing their enemies, and filmed with the foreground-background interaction that dynamizes screen space.

Cultural References

For any film to be consumed and understood by a large, heterogenous audience, it must relate to collectively held conceptions of the world. Correspondence to the model of reality shared by large numbers of people constitutes cultural *vraisemblance*. While correspondence does not imply casuality, and a film should not

be reduced to variables extrinsic to it, it is appropriate and useful to explore what concordance the confluence of genre texts has with cultural references.

The most successful formula for contemporary cinema is the integration of the science fiction and Western film genres. Filmmakers are now using science fiction to communicate themes and even narratives of classic Westerns. George Lucas, director and scriptwriter of *Star Wars* and executive producer of *The Empire Strikes Back*, has speculated that his generation is not filming Westerns because the Old West, that director John Ford and his contemporaries knew firsthand, is not part of the young filmmakers' experiential reality.[23] But films like *Star Wars* and its successors are, like Westerns, essentially romances. Following Northrop Frye's analysis of the *mythos* of romance, Cawelti identifies the basic themes of the Western as the quest and "the struggle between hero and villain."[24] These very themes are found in all six science fiction films considered in this study. The significant difference is in the visual arena in which they are expressed. The contemporary science fiction film even expropriates familiar Western storylines, as in *Battle Beyond the Stars*, which is a 1980 retelling of the 1960 Western, *The Magnificent Seven*.[25]

George Lucas states that he created *Star Wars* in anticipation of a youthful audience's need for fantasy adventure.[26] As Garth Jowett and James M. Linton point out, "a movie is largely shaped by reference to real or perceived audience needs, preferences, or even prevalent public attitudes."[27] It is not known whether attendance at science fiction films is evenly distributed throughout the population of filmgoers, or whether the audience for science fiction films are the same people who avidly consume the Western in other commodified forms like fashion and music. Audience data for movies do indicate that they "are perhaps more a medium for adolescents

than they are for children or adults."[28] Teenagers, according to 1979 survey findings, account for almost fifty percent of total yearly box office admissions.[29] This age group may be primarily responsible for the record-breaking success of science fiction films and the virtual disappearance of the conventional Western in the last four years.

Perhaps this is because the young movie audience does not find the Western culturally *vraisemblable*, i.e., meaningful in terms of the cultural reality. Henry Nash Smith has noted that the myth and philosophy of the American Western "offered no intellectual apparatus for taking account of the industrial revolution."[30] This inadequacy is egregious for adolescent filmgoers today because of the rapid diffusion of technological innovations. In the past five years, this has been particularly conspicuous in the form of consumer products like home video and video games, packaged as entertainment.

It is likely that teenagers habituated to such "state of the art" diversions seek replication and elaboration of this entertainment in the sensory data of science fiction film: mechanical objects like spaceships rather than organic objects like horses, filmed with artificial studio and laboratory special effects, rather than natural, on-location shooting. This is not at all to imply that young Americans have progressive ideas, but only that their cultural model of reality better accommodates the *setting* of science fiction than that of the Western. This study has demonstrated how classic Western visual motifs like the saloon, the devastated homestead, the campfire, the horse, and the wilderness persist, *mutatis mutandis*, in the artificial setting of the science fiction film.

NOTES

[1] Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), p. 139.

[2] Thomas Gerard Schatz, "Hollywood Film Genre as Ritual: A Theoretical and Methodological Inquiry," *DAI*, 37 (1977), 7374A (Univ. of Iowa).

[3] Andrew Tudor, *Theories of Film* (New York: Viking, 1973), p. 145.

[4] Paul Petlewski, "Complication of Narrative in the Genre Film," *Film Criticism*, 4, No. 1 (1979), 19. Following an interesting, brief discussion of genre "cross-breeding." Petlewski focuses on Anthony Mann's *Raw Deal* (1948).

[5] Stuart M. Kaminsky, *American Film Genres: Approaches to a Critical Theory of Popular Film* (New York: Laurel-Dell, 1977), Ch. 7. Stanley Solomon, *Beyond Formula: American Film Genres* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), Ch. 3.

[6] This revival was unexpected not only by the film industry but by respected film historians. See, for example, Thomas W. Bohn and Richard L. Stromgren, *Light and Shadows: A History of Motion Pictures*, 2nd ed. (Sherman Oaks, Calif.: Alfred, 1978). Immediately after accurate acknowledgement that "*Star Wars* was the film of 1977 and of film box-office history as it became the largest grossing box-office hit of all time" (p. 381), this otherwise reputable text discusses "The Decline of the Genre Film" (p. 381), and concludes that "genres as a whole have little appeal for the American audience anymore" (p. 382).

[7] According to distributors' rentals in the U.S.A. and Canada, the films are, in rank order, *Star Wars*, *Jaws*, and *The Empire Strikes Back*. See: *Variety*, 14 Jan. 1981, p. 28.

[8] Jeff Rovin, "The Arts Film," *Omni*, April 1980, p. 26. Quoting Robert Wise.

[9] Edward Buscombe, "The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema," *Screen*, 11, No. 2 (March-April 1970), 196-204; rpt. in *Film Genre: Theory and Criticism*, ed. Barry Grant (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1977), p. 32.

[10] John Baxter, *Science Fiction in the Cinema* (New York: Paperback Library, 1970), p. 13.

[11] John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Univ. Popular Press, n.d.), p. 35.

[12] Peter Homans, "Puritanism Revisited: An Analysis of the Contemporary Screen-Image Western," *Studies in Public Communication*, No. 3 (Summer 1961), p. 75.

[13] Jon Tuska, *The Filming of the West* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), p. 33.

[14] Homans, p. 80.

[15] Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950), p. 123.

[16] Robert G. Collins, "*Star Wars*: The Pastiche of Myth and the Yearning for a Past Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 11, No. 1 (1977), 6.

[17] Roger Copeland, "When Films 'Quote' Films, They Create a New Mythology," *The New York Times*, Sunday, 25 Sept. 1977, Sect. D, p. 1. Copeland's observation is acknowledged in: Andrew Gordon, "*Star Wars*, A Myth for Our Time," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 6 (1978), 318.

[18] This refers to *Mythologies: Le cru et le cuit* (*The Raw and the Cooked*) by the doyen of French structural anthropology, Claude Levi-Strauss (Paris, 1964). In his analysis of this work, Edmund Leach explains that "cooking is thus universally a means

by which nature is transformed into culture..." See: Edmund Leach, *Claude Levi-Strauss* (New York: Viking, 1970), p. 30.

[19] Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (Bloomington, Indiana Univ. Press, 1969), p. 11. Much of Kitses' discussion in Ch. 1 is based on Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, already cited.

[20] Cawelti, p. 39.

[21] Cawelti, p. 42.

[22] Cawelti, p. 42-43.

[23] Paul Scanlon, "The Force Behind George Lucas," *Rolling Stone*, 25 Aug. 1977, p. 43.

[24] Cawelti, pp. 68-69.

[25] *The Magnificent Seven* is itself an adaptation of the Japanese film *The Seven Samurai* (1954).

[26] Scanlon, p. 43.

[27] Garth Jowett and James M. Linton, *Movies as Mass Communication*, Sage CommText, No. 4 (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1980), 82.

[28] I. C. Jarvie, *Movies as Social Criticism: Aspects of Their Social Psychology* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1978), p. 36.

[29] Jowett and Linton, p. 80, Table 3.2.

[30] Smith, p. 259.